TRANSCRIPT – In Conversation with Atelier E.B.

V&A Dundee Team
Hello, and welcome to V&A Dundee. We’re an international design museum showcasing the brilliance of Scottish creativity and the best of design around the world. The following audio was recorded live at V&A Dundee as part of our public programme. If you’d like to come along to our next event head over to the website for details.

Mairi
Hello, this is Beca, this is Lucy, I am Mairi. Just in case you are not sure which one is which. Thank you for having us here at V&A this lunchtime.

I’m not going to do too much of an intro because everything I’ll introduce; we’ll probably cover in the talk and if we don’t - there will be 15 minutes at the end for questions. So, you can ask anything you’re dying to ask then. Also, just to point out we’re here to talk about the Faux Shop (for anyone that’s just wandered in) is the installation in the [Michelin Design Gallery].

First of all, their practice is known as Atelier E.B So, the first question would be: What is Atelier E.B? How would you define it? A horrible question to start.

Beca
So it’s a combination of Lucy and I. Lucy is an artist, I am a designer and we put together our skills and our knowledge and that transfers into publications, clothing, exhibitions. I would say that’s Atelier E.B.

Lucy
Yeah, we started thinking about doing interior design, with another collaborator called Bernie Reid. Bernie was a stencil- a graffiti artist who worked in stencil. I was studying decorative art,
decorative painting techniques. Like fake wood and fake marble, trompe l'oeil. Beca is a trained printer. And we'd done a project together and we'd just realised how well we got on, and thought we could pool all our skills, practical skills. So, we started doing a few interiors and then at a certain point through our research project into the history of the Scottish textile industry we just naturally morphed into a fashion label. And Bernie left, and it was just the two of us. So yeah, principally we research, we present that research and we turn that research into both fashion garments that people can buy, and exhibitions and different kinds of projects.

Mairi
How long have you been together for? How long have you been working together?

Beca
We started with Bernie in 2007, I've known Lucy since 1999 and we were friends, and then we started Atelier [E.B] as an interiors company in 2007. And then it wasn’t until we did the textile exhibition that Lucy was talking about: about Scottish Textiles in 2011 with Panel - the curators, Panel that we got into making clothes.

Mairi
And that exhibition was called ‘The Inventors of Tradition’? Which is a play on the Hugh Trevor-Roper essay ‘The Invention of Tradition’.

So, you both had successful careers before Atelier [E.B] though. Can you tell me a bit about what you did before you came together?

Beca
So success is a funny thing. I had my own label. I wouldn’t say it was successful, but it was successful in terms that I did it under my own rules and regulations. So, in terms if you’re talking success about sales. Lucy was one of my only customers! [Laughter from the panel] and
she bought for all her friends. So, Lucy championed me from the very beginning. Thank God! So, in terms of success, I was very successful in doing what I wanted to do, the way I wanted to do it without cutting corners. And I taught at Glasgow School of Art when I returned from London, on the Masters programme there. So, it’s a different story.

Mairi
You were based in Edinburgh I think that’s really important to point out as well.

Beca
Based in Edinburgh

Mairi
...as a fashion designer

Beca
Absolutely yeah, I came back from Saint Martins in ‘99. And have remained in Edinburgh ever since.

Mairi
And which designers did you work for though – beyond your own label?

Beca
So, I’ve freelanced for many conglomerates, I’ve never belonged to a company I’ve always remained outside of ownership so to speak. So I’ve worked for people like Stella McCartney, Emanuel Ungaro he was a couture house I worked for, and I worked with Clare Johnston in Liberty’s. So I did my fair stint going between London and Edinburgh and getting experience and understanding the industry and what’s good about it and what’s not good about it.
Mairi
And you were at Ungaro before Lindsey Lohan?

[Laughter from the panel]

Beca
Yep, yes, I was, I was still at Ungaro when Monsieur was still in charge and was still a couture house. I worked on the read to wear label called Ungaro - or U [Parallel] and I didn’t actually work with Monsieur he worked on couture in the other room, but I got to work with the atelier. But, of course, couture houses are a rarity now and rightly so. But great experience.

Mairi
And what about you Lucy – your background before Atelier?

Lucy
So I’ve worked as a visual artist for 20 years and I’ve done a lot of collaboration. I’ve always really enjoyed the contrast of having a very kind of dedicated, and sometimes very labor intensive studio practice and then needing the contrast of working with other people, being more spontaneous, so I’ve always like to organise events and I’ve had a small record label and done writing and publishing.

Any friendship has the potential to do an interesting collaboration I think. And I knew Beca for a long time, and I think it was just the day she explained to me – when I asked her this great thing I’m wearing – where does it get made. And she said of I make it I print it here or I get everything made as close as I can to where I live. And I realised that as an artist its very common that you think about what you do and how it sits in a certain kind of economy or network and you want to know the world in which your stuff goes into and understand how all
these networks work. So, to then realise that I loved fashion, but I actually had no idea how things got on to your back. I had a bit of a nervous breakdown and just realised – how does this work? I just started pumping Beca for information and was just fascinated that I could meet someone that worked in a different field and we had such similar ethos about independence and self-sufficiency and local history and culture and craft.

I worked with lots of other visual artists, but somehow it being a cross discipline takes out a lot of the kind of aggro - it’s really great to work with someone who works in a different discipline you share something but, it still gets to be a bit of break from my own head it’s about making things

**Beca**

And vice versa

**Mairi**

First of all, what were your first impressions of each other?

**Beca and Lucy**

Ooh *[Laughter from the panel]*

**Mairi**

Was that a gasp from the audience

*[Laughter from the panel and audience]*

**Beca**

You were definitely suspicious.
Lucy
I thought Beca and Bernie were a pair of like ‘fashion people’

[Laughter from the panel]

Mairi
And what does that mean? Before you knew about fashion?

Lucy
That, you know I just remember you tottering down these cobbles on your high heels. I remember thinking – and because you are a very friendly person you were always full of compliments. And I was a bit like “yeah well…” Because Beca asked me to model in a shoot that they were doing in a magazine called ‘Nova’. And I’d seen Bernie’s work in things like ID he was quite a respected fashion illustrator, so I knew that you were interesting people, I just think you just always imagine fashion people are a bit shallow. So, then I was pleasantly surprised the things we discussed when we met for the first time you really followed up, and we kind of kept in touch and slowly we realised we have a lot of things in common.

Mairi
Ok, I’ll come back to that point about the shallowness of fashion later – but Beca what were your first impressions of Lucy?

Beca
Well I actually didn’t know anything about Lucy, it’s a bit of a weird one, I’d gone to, was it the Beck’s Futures?
Lucy
I think it was the British art show? At Inverleith House? The Fruitmarket?

Beca
it was Inverleith House and Lucy was standing with her mum. And I didn’t know Lucy had work in the show. I just saw – I had my own label at the time and I had two models. I had a Korean friend Yuni that would model for me and I had a polish friend Babs who would model for me and I really wanted a Scottish woman to model my clothes as well. I saw Lucy standing with her mum and I thought she’s the perfect model; she’s got that skin that looks like never been tanned, she’s got a great rack on her and I asked around the room does anybody know this person? And they were like, that’s Lucy McKenzie. I am not from the artworld, I didn’t have a clue! And I had just come back from London, so I asked around and got her phone number and asked if she’d model for me and of course she was very suspicious and rightly so.

Mairi
So how long did it take until you gelled, until you found some common ground?

Lucy
Well in 2003 I did have a project in Warsaw with an artist Paulina Olowska. We ran a bar where we designed the interior and made like homemade vodka. And I asked Beca to design the outfits for the bar staff. And they were such interesting designs. They were so odd with these big weightlifter’s leather belts.

Beca
[To the audience] That was taken from your Next belt, mum.
Lucy
And lace socks and it was just so out of the box, that I thought this person thinks in a really odd way

Mairi
...captured your attention.

Beca
And I was heavily pregnant at the time too so I didn’t get to go to the bar and it was the most sort of – I didn’t feel rock and roll at all being pregnant – so it was the most I could feel like I was there, knowing that they were all drinking vodka and having a brilliant time. A lot of hard work but also a brilliant time...

Lucy also modeled for us. Bernie and I did the Stella McCartney shop. We did a huge frieze, screen-printed frieze for Stella’s first New York store. Lucy was actually on the walls. So, we worked together but we didn’t force anything.

Lucy
We always have so much to talk about. I don’t know if you remember but I just feel like I always completely pumped you with questions –

Beca
I don’t remember! It’s just lovely to be around somebody that’s likeminded and also expands your mind and that’s really key. What I love about Atelier [E.B] and working with Lucy is that we don’t agree, and we don’t like the same things but there’s enough love and respect there that we’re into what each other is into.
Mairi
Well I was going to ask, its beautiful thing working together but it can also be quite fraught. How do you negotiate your different perspectives and realise them within the form of an exhibition or collection?

Lucy
So for instance, I’ll give you an example. Beca will say “Oh I want to do this publicity photograph based on the shot from the Bauhaus of the woman sitting on a chair with the, is it Oskar Schlemmer mask” and I will just roll my eyes and go “oh my god what a cliché, yeah great.” And then I’ll say to Beca “yeah I would like to do something kind of to do with the Elsa Schiaparelli’s trompe-l’œil bow jumper” and she’ll just go “oh my god that is the biggest fashion cliché” She has her look on art, I have my naivety when it comes to fashion history. [to Beca] You have your – I wouldn’t say naivety but you’ve got a different – non-academic perspective

Beca
 Totally.

Lucy
So it’s actually just really a relief to let go of that kind of vice like grip you have on your own sense of taste – or permission, reference. And that’s really important in the collaboration, because then I learn things I wouldn’t learn otherwise because I’ve let someone else do their thing.

Beca
I’m exactly the same.
Mairi

I can really see it from your exhibitions that both of your voices are there. It’s not like you’ve tried to find some sort of unified manifesto, I can definitely see both of you in there. Now, how has your relationship fed back into your own practice? Can you see the influence of Atelier E.B. in what you do individually now?

Beca

Yeah, I mean I am not sure where anything starts or stops to be honest. It’s really hard to say. Because it’s not like you can switch your brain on for Atelier [E.B] and then switch it off and switch on Beca. Beca is in Atelier [E.B] just as Lucy is.

I try not to think about these things too much, you know? I don’t own any of this. It’s not ownership it’s – If I think of it in terms of – apart from Bernie and Bonnie, this is my most successful relationship I’ve ever had. And so that alone I just don’t want to think too much about it. It just is. And when it isn’t anymore – if that ever comes, then so be it. But I’m very proud of how we navigate through our friendship and through business. And we are a business, we have to make money to survive.

Lucy

I will say also that for me it has had a huge influence on my work, and all that research that we do is of course in my own practice. But I think because no matter how wonderful a collaboration is it’s still – I still have to check with Beca if certain things are ok or not, so then that means that working on my own - the total freedom of doing things in a completely – I don’t have to please anyone. You know or check in on everything with someone else. That often means that I get to take the same sort of research and then, then I can see what I really
want to do with it personally. And I get to do that without the restrictions of having to – because of also with Atelier [E.B] you have to explain things a bit. Because that’s just the way we work. Whereas with my own work I don’t have to be so kind of – I can be a bit more subjective and bit more weird.

Mairi
So, you mentioned that Atelier E.B. is a fashion label. Now, you operate outside the usual structures of the fashion industry in terms of the way you sell, where you sell, the calendar that you work to. Was that a decision that you took or is that how it’s evolved?

Lucy
I think everything we’ve done have just been a response to the restrictions of how we work. We know there’s things that we don’t want to do, so we’ve had to find other ways to do it. And we’ve given public talks before and there’s been young designers in the audience looking for a formula and we just can’t offer that because it’s so particular to our own situation. And so much of it is based around the fact that through my own work I have kind of anyway an open door to certain institutions or visibility. So, it’s just kind of ... it’s not trolling but it’s cannibalising on all that’s there anyway and using those institutions electricity...and transport.

Mairi
You’ve worked within the fashion industry and with Atelier. Do you prefer working beyond the confines of the traditional fashion industry?

Beca
I suppose I always, even when I was studying fashion, I always had this sort of love hate with it, because you know I always understood: it’s a major pollutant of the world, who needs any more clothes? So, I think I’ve had to try and navigate a way through it that felt good. And
Atelier [E.B] feels good. Lucy is obviously also busy with her own work a lot of the time. It feels – we can only do a collection once every three years; that suits us. You know, we’re not interested in anything more than that because like Lucy said before it usually comes with a huge body of research.

Not that you would know that when you look at the collection, not that you have to know that. Because some might say that’s just a round-neck lambswool jumper. But within all our clothes there is symbolism and meaning, but that’s irrelevant if you really don’t want – if you don’t read into it, fine. If you do, we’ve got lots of stories to tell.

Mairi
So you can engage with it on whatever level....Ok, now a ‘Smash Hits’ style of question: Who’s your favorite designer? - Contemporary or from history.

Beca
I know – So I’ll say Lucy’s. Lucy’s is Madeleine Vionnet

Lucy
And Beca’s is Bonnie Cashin. I would just like to say also, from the last question that we have total respect for anyone who manages to make it work in the conventional fashion industry.

Beca
Oh absolutely.

Lucy
It’s not that we think that people who do it in a conventional way are wrong. I think that just knowing how much work goes into, it’s incredible that especially small and independent labels
Mairi
Well they often don’t.

Beca
And we just have to navigate it. We have losses, and we have gains it’s all an experiment for us too. We don’t have a formula so to speak. But what we do have is a structure that allows us to make items, i.e. art objects that we sell for art prices that subsidise the fashion. And we don’t actually make any money off of the fashion because we don’t mass produce. So that is our formula – but it doesn’t always work. But that’s how we manage to navigate through making clothes. Unless you’re mass producing, you don’t make money from clothing. And we’re not interested in mass producing or cutting corners or exploiting people. But we need these clothes.

Mairi
Well the clothes, I think, have a very particular look, even though your both bringing your own perspectives. What would you say were the recurring themes, or items, or motifs within the Atelier [E.B] collections?

Lucy
Well we use neo classical imagery a lot.

Beca
Which we’ve both used in our own work, before we worked together and that continues through.
Wear-ability. The practicality of something. Does it get better when you wash it? We like things like that.

**Lucy**

Lots of layers, because I mean I live in Belgium which is also not the warmest country in the world. We both have cold studios, so we just know the value of when you can be putting the layers on and still look good.

**Beca**

...and I think the textile element.

**Mairi**

[to Beca] because you studied textiles, didn’t you?

**Beca**

I studied fashion print, yeah. So, I’m trained as a printer. But I suppose subconsciously because we’re Scottish I really that believe that we have this sort of deep understanding of textiles, and the Belgians do as well because they had a similar industry. And so often the fashion, or the garments that were created in Scotland and in Belgium relate to textiles first and foremost. It’s not so much about cut and silhouette its more about textile leads.

**Mairi**

And for those who don’t know the “E.B” stands for Edinburgh and Brussels. Edinburgh for Beca, Brussels for Lucy.

**Lucy**

I would say as well, that the kind of things that we want to make are things that don’t
necessarily look that good online. This is why we do these show rooms that tour because we just want people to feel it. We want people to feel how soft it is. The idea that -the pressure to design for selling online, that’s just a whole other thing and we just don’t want that.

Mairi

So when you do showrooms you operate as the salespeople, don’t you?

Lucy

Yeah, and we get such amazing feedback from the customers.

Mairi

And what types of people wear your clothes? Is It quite a broad range? Are you surprised sometimes at the people who come to the showroom and try things on?

Beca

Absolutely yeah, and who purchase it.
We have very expensive items that are normally order only. But we also have sweatshirts and badges so that everybody can get a bit of it. But it really ranges, we do have some really great customers, we have very loyal fanbase and if people can’t afford the clothes, we try to work out a pricing structure so they can pay it up. We’re very open to the idea that people want it, but can’t necessarily afford the more expensive items, so we try to understand the customer - because they are loyal.

Lucy

- and there are things where we would of course love to always work with organic cotton, but it’s really expensive, and so we also work with Fruit of the Loom off the shelf because we also
want it to be not that expensive so we offer different

**Beca**

-price brackets...

**Mairi**

...you’ve got socks and brollies and soap on a rope.

Just to bring it back to the Faux Shop: what is the Faux Shop, what are we looking at here?
What was the idea behind it?

**Lucy**

*[To Beca]* It’s an artwork isn’t it? It’s an artwork that is simultaneously a display device. It was made for an exhibition called Passer-by that was staged at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2018, that then travelled to Paris, and is now in Moscow. And we were the curators of the show, but we also exhibited our own work and we had the fashion -the clothes for sale. We invited contemporary artists, we borrowed historical pieces, so it was a very very tricky thing to navigate our position within it - because we had so many hats to put on. And we had to think about the different ways we’d have to handle all the material, depending on if we’d made it or we’d borrowed it. Other people’s work you just naturally have to treat it more conservatively, because with our work we can just do whatever we like. For other people’s work you just have to have a but if distance. We made this and several other pieces as connective things to join different parts of the exhibition. We’d found all this amazing research and one thing we wanted to do was connect the public, to connect the present with the past by slightly bringing to life things that we were showing. So for instance in the show we also had these huge decorative hands that opened a curtain, which were a direct copy of something from an exhibition called ‘Britain Can Make It’ which was from 1946.
At the V&A

- at the Victoria and Albert in London.

And so this was a piece that we hoped could connect things also physically, you saw the back of it and the front of it, which was really important in the exhibition because it was about display and the connection of fashion mannequins with modern art, and also just the overlap between display and art.

Yeah, it’s a practical art piece. Because we can change the window display every time we install it. We have freedom within. So what I really like about this is that, you can actually use it you can utilise it - so it sells our collection or we can put other people’s work in the window. Although I don’t think we would I think it would always be ‘our work’ so to speak but it doesn’t necessarily have to be clothing. And so this will continue as a piece. It’s been bought by the Museum Brandhorst in Germany, so we’ve had to loan it back for V&A [Dundee], they kindly managed to negotiate that. And it’s a piece of work that will always evolve.

So was it based on a particular shop or is it based on an every-shop? Something you can see anywhere?

So it’s loosely based on a shop in Ostend where Lucy actually owns a property now, but at the time we just used to go to Ostend to Mu.ZEE which is a brilliant art institution there.
Lucy

...or to go to the beach

Beca

Or go to the beach. And we did a group show at Mu.ZEE as well, and this shop was on the corner near the museum. And we used to paw over the window display because it was mannequin-less, they didn’t have mannequins in the window, they just did lots of beautiful draping and it was a shop for women over a certain age. And it just had a particular feel to it that chimed with Atelier.

Lucy

Yeah - again, one of the reasons that we started working together was, I remember, we had a really long conversation about boutique designs. I remember asking you what you would like your perfect shop to be like and that’s in a way how the collaboration started. But we’ve always appreciated shop window display. Especially when it looks a little bit like out of date. Those shops that you think ‘oh my god this is going to be gone in a few years, this is like a time capsule’. And of course, you realise that especially with window display. Because it has such a fast turnover, it’s got to be so contemporary that even when it’s a bit out of date it looks really dusty. So, in the end it becomes a kind of turbo charged symbol of everything that we know anyway about the way culture changes and taste changes. Fashion itself is also a really good and interesting indicator in the world of contemporary art and literature and everything else zeitgeist.

Mairi

And also the skills involved dressing a window – can you talk a wee bit about that? And who you worked with?
Beca

Definitely. So we worked with Barbara and Howard -

[to Lucy] How did we meet Howard – was it through Martin at Cabinet?

Lucy

So this window dresser called Howard Tong, he came from a performance art background and we worked with a commercial gallery in London called Cabinet and one of the men that set that up had done window display for Harvey Nichols and Mulberry. And had done it with this guy – Howard.

So I’d always know that my gallerist was really good at like putting up curtains, and designing art fair booths because he just had this touch – he understood the power of display. And so, we got in touch with Howard through Martin. We did a little interview, and he put us in touch with Barbara and he knew, because her background was in men’s outfitting, she really had the touch for how you do all these things with cuffs and collars, and padding, and pinning. We worked with them and another woman Kathryn Scanlan who was another part of their team. And I found it interesting because I had studied and then worked in decorative painting trompe-l’œil, fake wood, fake marble, which is a craft skill, but it is commercial. But now because it is lost, it feels really precious and very skillful. And it’s the same with window display. I think as there is this complete crisis in physical retail, it makes us see shops and windows with a slightly nostalgic eye. Because they’re going - highstreets are dying.

Mairi

Would you say it is a dying art?

Lucy

Absolutely – totally.
Beca
You can’t study it. Its – what you would study now the equivalent would be visual merchandising, which is completely different, you don’t learn how to trim a window you learn about numbers, units and it’s a very different industry. For instance, when Barbara and Howard used to dress windows, they would do it 9-5 or whenever the shop was open like everybody else, they would go to work like everybody else. Nowadays shop windows are done in the dead of night. Nobody gets to see the windows getting done like it’s a dirty – like it’s a bad word, that we don’t see the makings of something.

Mairi
…or they say “Excuse our appearance” [in reference to signage]

Beca
Exactly - if they cover it but it’s usually done in the dead of night. So, it’s sort of fascinating because we need it. We need it in order to sell items. If a window display is great, it will get a passerby in the shop.

Mairi
And those skills, there would have been a time that every town had a Howard and a Barbara who were able to do it. So did you hope to capture the history of all this was that part of it? Have people told you their stories and have they fed back to you?

Lucy
The Mary Quant show that’s just about to open here [at V&A Dundee] we saw it in London, and we just rubbernecked; just listened to all the conversations especially women, I mean I guess only women talking about their memories of Mary Quant, making her clothes, buying her
clothes, and it was the same with this. Because we’d be there selling the clothes, certainly for a certain amount of time. The amount of conversations that we had with people, where just their eyes would glaze over and they would talk about their memories of the shop in their town...

**Mairi**

...it captures the everyday, I think you’ve done that really well. So what sort of feedback have you had...

...I know the answer to this question but have you had any really important visitors to your exhibition that you were excited about?

*Laughter from the panel*

**Beca**

Yeah! Well I got to meet my hero Martin Margiela, which was pretty amazing. And he luckily didn’t disappoint – because you never know in these situations. But he came to see the show in Paris, and we had really good conversations about - his mother was a hairdresser. We spoke about his family.

**Mairi**

He’s gorgeous apparently-

**Beca**

He is gorgeous

**Mairi**

*To the audience* He never has his photograph taken.
Beca

So I didn’t actually know what he was going to look like. We also met Bless, who are a design duo that worked with Margiela back in the early 90’s. But have always remained, even though they’ve worked for conglomerates or other fashion houses as well as themselves, they’ve always remained independent. I think they started as stylists and then it sort of moved into fashion. So, it was really nice to talk to them, we’ve had some really interesting... -We’re outside of fashion but when we showed in Paris, we were there for Paris Fashion Week, which brought lots of people out. So it was good it’s good to meet these people...

Lucy

..dip a toe in and then leave again

Beca

..and then run!

[Laughter from the panel]

Mairi

[To Lucy] Did you not meet someone related to Madeleine Vionnet?

Lucy

Yes so that’s my hero, [To Beca] Madeleine Vionnet.

Would you say Vionnet is the Duchamp of fashion? She’s a really important figure; and her only living relative, her Grand Niece or her Niece, came to the show. I’d also like to mention with this piece, when you asked why did we make it. Because when we as a label have worked out how we want to display our clothes, and we’ve just never found fashion mannequins that we liked using. And so we learned through the show, that this is the way we want to show our
clothes, this is what makes them look good. This is how we want them to be seen.

Mairi
and it captures the body in a way that a mannequin can’t...

Lucy
Yeah, and we learned so much about also as a sculpture – we don’t really work in sculpture but this combination of the tromp l’oiel and the very similitude of a shop. But then it’s so beautifully trimmed, that’s the word you use trim a window rather than dress a window. It’s been trimmed so well by Barbara and Howard, that you have this kind of anthropomorphic – you have the clothes in these dynamic positions because it’s with all these threads its extremely fragile and vulnerable. So, you have a sculpture which combines that sense of time. You know, you think of the dustiness of windows and that its changing, but the clothes will stay the same probably. So it will slowly become this snow globe.

Beca
But also it’s a school. We’re learning.

Lucy
We’re learning.

Beca
Every time we work with Barbara and Howard, it’s like we’ve gone to school, and we’re learning through them.

Mairi
So you take the skills away with you afterwards?
**Beca**

Oh we do - we did street vitrines, because we sold this piece to Germany, now that Passer-by is in Moscow at the moment - we created new pieces for Moscow. We created three street vitrines, and we devised different ideas for those vitrines, and we really worked one to one with Howard and Barbara trying to make those ideas come into fruition.

**Mairi**

So you sold the piece to a museum in Germany - do you have other pieces in the permanent collections of galleries and museums?

**Lucy**

A couple yeah. In Mu.ZEE in Ostend, our folding screen. We've got a piece in a collection in Scotland in St. Andrews.

**Beca**

Yeah, They've got the football strip.

**Mairi**

-and I was going to ask how much of its clothing that goes into permanent collections, I imagine that confounds a lot collectors and curators.

**Beca**

Yes that's quite new and we've seen that they don't really know how to like store it yet. So it's a bit of a learning curve for us.

**Mairi**

And thinking more about the lowly position of fashion, within the hierarchy of the museum, as
opposed to the technical aspects of it. Do you come across much of that?

**Lucy**

You know, we just come across that all the time. In terms of how, on both sides of it - the fashion historians say you know ‘how can that be interesting it's just a burgundy jumper?’. Because they expect fashion in the fashion museum to look like a Björk costume, or you know a Martin Margiela waistcoat made of broken crockery. It doesn't look like a kind of nice school jumper.

So, we have that on one side; and then, I mean on the other side, with museums I guess that's why, I mean we talk a lot and I try to turn that into quite serious text. Because I really want to explain that this is not just about “Oh we do fashion isn't it nice”. It's like this is a piece that is meant to absolutely interrogate all those hierarchies between the legitimate world of fine art, and then mass culture and design as something that's considered underneath. And something like that is exactly on this border which is problematic; the amount of times someone will still describe something as ‘just window dressing’. Which implies all these things to do with gender, like it’s frivolous and it’s shallow

**Mairi**

-it’s the fear of the feminine

**Lucy**

Lots of visual artists like to work in fashion and do things – like they love fashion shows because then you have models. They love to dabble, but usually they always say “oh but I’m not interested in fashion” because they know if they admit to really be engaged with fashion, they will taint the autonomy and integrity of their kind of artistic position, which has to be kept separate to remain serious and sort of masculine. So this is exactly -
Mairi
-well the opposite of frivolity.

Lucy
Yes and while “just window dressing” is still a pejorative term, we're going to be here to... to annoy!

Mairi
That leads me onto the blurb for today, you ask these questions: is window dressing simply an everyday part of popular culture or is it a unique and over often overlooked form of art and design practice? Have you been able to draw a conclusion on this?

Lucy
I guess the question would be - do you have to say it's art to - then for it to have value. We went to a conference in a few months ago and the incredible curator Judith Clark was there, and in a way she was arguing that exhibition design is an art form. And I'm always a bit unsure about this because it is like people want to be let into the world of art so that it can be legitimised, and often so they can just get paid more. You know, we know the designer Peter Saville who's an incredible designer, but he wants to be an artist because he just wants to get paid more for what he does anyway.

Maybe that's from being from that luxurious position of being an artist and saying like ‘I don't see that design and art as any better than each other’. Like it's just about this kind of old a hierarchy of like mass culture as female. So, I would rather see museums democratised. If you go to somewhere like Mexico City, folk art and high art are absolutely intertwined. It’s just our problem in the West. So, I would rather see what is appreciated and collected, the way it is in somewhere like Japan. I think that’s more important that everybody jostling to get into art,
because it was always for economic reasons. When you've got an art fair for performance art and people trying to find a way to monetise that...

**Mairi**

And we could have a whole conversation about that.

**Lucy**

and that’s the conversation that we want. That’s what we’re doing this not just like we like jumpers, it is that we want to work out why are all these things are still in place.

It’s the same with the window dressers, and the research we did at understanding what a weird world that was because it was always men who did it but it’s such a kind of... it has such a precarious like male identity because you’re dealing with like you know, flounces and frills and the shallow. So window dressers had to kind of style themselves a bit like you know the TV show ‘Mad Men’ and these kind of Ad guys, you are like these like suave guys, manipulating the desires of female customers. So that job had to be kind of staged like that, as this playboy thing – even though they were all gay. It’s really fascinating.

**Mairi**

It borrows language from things that are seen as more... have more gravitas. So, this shop has been on a bit of a tour, and now we have it in Dundee and you've re-curated I suppose the contextual content of the exhibition. What can people see when they go out there and why have you chosen what goes alongside the shop?

**Beca**

I suppose we don’t often get to show in Scotland. In fact we seldom show in Scotland’s so most of the objects, the historical objects around the Faux Shop relate back to either Dundee
or Scotland and its past. So we have a beautiful work by Graham Little who is an artist. For those of you that don’t know is an artist that lives in London but he is from Dundee originally and studied at Dundee and then I think Goldsmiths?

[To the audience] Graham are you here? Goldsmiths? He’s nodding.

So we have a piece of his work, and what I love about that particular work is in the historical. You could look at Graham's work and you might not know it's from now, it could be the future, it could be the past. I like the timelessness.

And what I really love is that it's a picture of a boutique from his imagination – it’s is from magazines but also his imagination. In that particular picture everything that’s folded on the shelves or the shoes that are sitting there: I want to try them on. It is proper desire, that picture is like a window display. It makes me want to buy those things in that shop.

Mairi

So it operates in a similar way to your Faux Shop?

Beca

I think so. And then opposite of that we actually happen to have a sculpture by an artist called John Buckley that used to sit in the window of the Rita Rusk hairdressers, a really famous hairdresser in Glasgow. Rita is actually coming to the opening tonight.

She and her husband had many salons across the West of Scotland, but their main mecca was in Glasgow in the city centre and the Pagliaccio, which is the sculpture out there, which is sort of clown scary figure, used to sit in their salon window. It's a Marmite piece, people either love it or hate it.
I’m from Edinburgh, and I even remember it sitting in the window of their salon, so we managed to find the actual [Pagliaccio] because Rita sold it at auction -

Mairi

-Well, before she sold it there was something that happened ...

Beca

Yeah she sold it at auction because the window [of the salon] got destroyed once by an Orange March, and the sculpture fell on the ground and smashed. She then had John Buckley, the original artist, refurb and fix it, and then to her it was never the same again. So, she sold it at auction. Then Kenny, who owns a hair salon in Paisley, he bought at auction and it now resides in Kenny's Hair Salon in Paisley. So that's where we found it.

Mairi

So, just to tie things up -and that we’ve time for some questions - what’s next for Atelier E.B? Is this the end of this iteration of the show and what happens next?

Beca

It is the end of this.

Lucy

One thing that has been brilliant about... we made this piece as not a problem solver but something to kind of fill a hole in an exhibition, and now it's become this thing that can generate things, which I didn't really expect. That you could kind of curate a whole show around it, so we'll see in the future...
Beca

But people keep asking us when we die what are they going to do – who’s going to do the windows [Laughter]
We like that it proves problematic as well.

Lucy

And next we can start on a new collection now that this is all done.
Start the wonderful cycle again: all the research and manufacturing and work out what we're going to do.

Beca

And I think this collection will be a small collection. After a big show like this we normally do a smaller collection, and get certain things out of our system that we want to wear.

Lucy

Yes, a bit faster and not build this whole world around it.

Mairi

Ok thank you very much for answering our questions today and we have time for a few questions from the floor...

Audience Member (1)

[In reference to visiting the Serpentine Gallery exhibition in London, 2018].
I wonder whether that kind of performance anxiety [of trying clothes on in the space] was sought through the designing of the show?

Beca
For those of you that didn’t go to the Serpentine: we had the fake shop that showed our work and then you walk down the corridor and you could walk into another room and that was the showroom, and whatever was in the shop window you could then try on in the showroom. There’s a mirror and screen to change behind, and you can try whatever on, and you could put in an order. In the showroom were the more expensive items that are order only - so we don’t contribute to the landfill we only make to order.

But then if you walk down the corridor again there was another shop, which we called the real shop and there you could buy like sweatshirts, brooches - the sort of cheaper range for the collection; so there was three different ways of looking at the collection. And I mean it’s a really good question, because some people cannot wait to rip their clothes off, and you know they’re going to first of all be really shy and they don’t want to try anything on, and then before you know it they’ve got everything on. Then there’s other people that just want to talk, they don’t want to try anything on. They just want to touch it and ask you questions about it. It’s very public but it’s really valuable to us, because we get to have dialogue directly with – it doesn’t have to be a customer – it’s the passer-by. They don’t have to buy anything, but there’s nothing quite like trying on a cashmere jumper you know, you don’t have to buy it. That’s the beauty of it, but to try on it's a nice experience.

Lucy

It was also that, like for me, the total fantasy that you go to an exhibition in a museum, you look at all these things and someone says do you want to try it on? and of course there was so few mannequins in the show, we thought well the people become our mannequins, and then of course then we have all mannequins in all these different shapes and sizes and colours and ages-

Beca
So thanks for being bold and trying it on

Lucy
But we know it’s not for everybody. Everybody has different thresholds for how much they want to get involved

Mairi
I used to work in fashion retail, a shop called A La Mode which was behind Harrods. It was a mecca in the late 90s; and Trinny and Susannah used to come in and they would be stripped off in the middle of the shop just wandering around in their knickers, touching each other, picking their own stuff and then you had other people where you had to move the mirror inside the room and not look at them. So, I think you were able to replicate that sort of performance anxiety you get when you’re shopping for real.

Audience Member (2)
You are both in different cities, and both very busy, and I wonder when something is winging it’s way to Beca or Beca to Lucy, as in a design and I wonder…. Are there physical things that arrive in in a post box or is it all in computers? What does that look like – because we never get to see that obviously and I would love to see the chemistry.

Beca
As an example, just last night Lucy arrived - half 10 at night, just got off the train and we’ve got a little front door that you have to come in and she’s sort of getting in the door with her bag, but she’s got this roll that she’s made – its rolled up fabric and she's used an old paint brush as a handle and she's masking taped it to onto the roll, and she's like “you take that, that’s for you”. Basically that is five panels for the new folding screen that we're making that she's just painted in her studio ...so that is literally how it operates...we don’t often use FedEx, we’re
physical. We tend to pack things into big suitcases, we’re always like changing

Lucy
And there is something to be said about not seeing each other that often. I don’t think we would do Atelier [E.B] if we didn’t have you know WhatsApp. Like that facilitates all this, all this amazing new tech communication. What it means is that we can we get ideas, but then like over three or four months we might find things second hand or make drawings, or just like think things through. So every time we meet is very, very full and exciting, and really intense. Then we part again, and it also means that we don’t bug they hell out of each other. That’s how you can get on.

Beca
There’s a respectful distance, but there is lots of post and swaps.

Lucy
For one collection in particular, we designed it in a way that I was really happy we found this way – we would talk about things that we wanted to make, certain concepts, and what we did is we both made them in paper one to one scale - like we imagined like a T shirt with the ornament on it.

Then we would get together and put them all on the floor, and we may have made the same idea but done it different ways, because we work differently. It also means that it’s half way between like a sketch, which we don’t really do, and a finished garment or toile. They end up all looking like - you know there’s the paper clothes that get burned in China to honour ancestors so things look a bit like that.

It also means if you just put them all out on the floor, you can also immediately see what a
collection might look like. So maybe as a visual artist working with paper as this intermediary form is really, really helpful, and I've never heard of that before. So again, we're just like making things up as we go along

**Audience Member (2)**

Does that kind of uncertainty, approach each other? or is it not really, is it more - feeling like presenting something that’s really quite resolved and they either, with grace, accept that or they kind of negotiate that or...

**Lucy**

It’s the first one, because we use each other as soundboards.

**Beca**

Absolutely, - muses.

If it looks good on Lucy and it looks good on me we’re on a winner, because we are different shapes and we have different tastes and it's really hard, it's just so comfortable. If I had a dilemma, without sounding arrogant here, I've worked my personal fields long enough that if I didn't know the body by now I would, you know I should really change. So, I'm very - even though I might be not confident in other areas in my work - I'm extremely confident and Lucy is exactly the same. But we don't cancel each other out because Lucy is an artist and I am a designer, we have a completely different way of looking at things and that is what is fascinating. So I think in design terms and Lucy thinks in art terms. I then am allowed space and then say to Lucy “no we can only have it in this colour that is the only colour in that colour palette” you know. I just think, because we work together we can give it up and it's okay.

**Lucy**

-And we know the value of how actually it takes sometimes a long time for an idea to filter
through or whatever. So that the things that we might be a bit like ambivalent about in each other’s ideas, and often you just keep quiet, and that maybe not so good idea just falls away, you don't have to argue about it. The good things just kind of- because it's done over such a long period of time - the things that keep recurring and then there's this kind of this ping-pong of an idea for something.

**Beca**

We also work with brilliant people so Lucy and I over the years - Mairi is one of them - we have a black book of like makers, writers that we pull on to make Atelier [E.B] look fantastic. But also it's because we believe that we shouldn't do everything, it's important that everybody has work, and you utilise what's on your doorstep, and you understand people’s skills - we take advantage of that. We work with a lot of brilliant people in order to create what we do whether that be factories or independently makers or writers.

**Audience Member (3)**

*Thank you both for a very interesting talk. You use the word nostalgia, I find there is a deep melancholy in a lot of the work when its displayed in a museum context, in a vitrine context. I wonder, how you [Beca and Lucy] feel about that? And how that is flipped over when people put the clothes on and wear them? And whether you see fashion perhaps, or your approach to fashion as a bridge between sculpture and performance?*

**Beca**

I think you're right, I think there is melancholy within it, because that's what we're faced with. You know, in the short time that we've made collections we've watched the industry here decline.

There is so few that we can work with now, because everybody is going out of business just...
things are changing things are shifting. It’s not like preachy and nor is it like holding onto the past. We’re respectful of the past, but we have to try and find formulas and solutions, and so I hope it also is positive that you know that we’re making collections, not every season, but in a different pace. And you know, we're trying to do things that look to the future.

**Lucy**

I would say also that when you say ‘in a museum’ - that’s also changing. If you think about things like the collecting habits of V&A, where they’re snatching placards out of people’s hands to put into collections and so I think from what I see, like museums are also kind of changing and responding. And with the idea of nostalgia it’s something that I get maybe criticised – it gets mentioned a lot in terms of my own practices an individual, because I basically only work with material from the past. And I would always say where does the past stop and start? There are kids now dressing from the 90s and they think that's like really old, and so I'm just not sure where the present and the past pass ways.

We’re in a really great period of re-examining the past, and the past is a very, very interesting place depending on how you look at. It is a great moment for fashion history, for post-colonial-theory, just so much interesting new perspectives on the past - and I think we hope to be part of that.

**Mairi**

And the digitisation of lots of collections as well has opened it up to people who might not otherwise have access.

**V&A Dundee Team**

*Thank you for listening. You can find more stories and resources on our website at vam.ac.uk/dundee*